LENT IS

No Farewell To Alleluia

James W. Kennedy

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By James W. Kennedy

Legend says that when Satan raised his giant battleax against Heaven's gates, God's shaft of lightning struck it from his hand. The flaming ax fell into the North Sea, and was changed into the one thousand acre isle of Lindisfarne. Through the centuries this bit of lore concerning God's victory inspired those who lived on or visited this island to keep Satan's power under foot.

If we use Lindisfarne as an analogy and think of Lent as a holy island, as a place where we might go for spiritual refreshment, we will cross to it in joy, not sadness. The true pilgrim's way does not require "Farewell to Alleluia," although one might suspect it from some of the observances of the season.

We have followed a much too gloomy precedent in many of our Lenten practices and devotions, stemming from the sixth century. When the Lombards invaded Italy, about 568 A.D., all Christians were called to observe a special season of fasting and prayer; but the invasion lasted so long the special supplications used became fixed in the liturgy of the Church and remained to give Lent its sad and melancholy face. Note the theme of the Lenten Collects. By the ninth century there was actually a service, widely used on the eve of this penitential season, called "Farewell to Alleluia."

But before the sixth century Lent was a more

joyful time when "Alleluia" was the accepted theme, and worshippers stood for the prayers to show their joy, because of Christ, who loved them enough to give His life for them, and who had redeemed them from the miserable condition of sin. The Passion and the Resurrection of our Lord were parts of one whole, and Ash Wednesday was the starting point for a pre-Easter season.

The same should be true today. Ashes may be heaped figuratively upon our souls to confess that the long ago spiritual victories of another Lent have become slow defeats in many hearts, or they may be even actually placed upon our foreheads. But only in this sense should Christians be sad and mourn. The Christian life begins with repentance ("We have erred and strayed . . . like lost sheep") but goes on to Alleluia, forgiveness and belonging.

Our constant prayers for the season are "Create and make in us new and contrite hearts," "Deliver us from the luxury of cheap melancholy," and "May our wretchedness give way to joy."

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A journey to this Holy Island of Lent means wading through the shallows of misery in order to enter the deep of lasting joy.

There are many treasures to be found in accepting the Lenten disciplines of penitence, fasting and self-denial, and they are appropriate for the Christian to follow, for they lead to the free gift of God's grace. Our Lord admonished us to

lay up spiritual treasure which we have to dig for. Therefore on our trip to this Holy Island of Lent, we seek His presence by the regular labor of prayer and holding adequate time for meditation in order to make good our intent to lead a new life, and to follow the commandments of God.

By so doing we are laying up lasting spiritual treasure. So there is no room for "cheap melancholy" which saps bodily strength, slows mental processes, and anesthetizes hearts. We seek our entrance into the fullness of Christ's life, to make this season a creative time, when we stir up our minds by more serious reflection and speed up our spiritual growth by longer times apart in His presence.

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By God's help Lent must be approached in the spirit of conquering, of making a victorious onslaught against our down-sitting, our backsliding, and our acceptance of defeat. That is why it is good to "give up" things, "little" by contrast, so that larger and more important matters may have a chance in our cluttered lives. As we move deeper into the season, we should hold tenaciously to every gain made no matter how small, to "drive a stake at each farthest point of advance and hang on."

But how? What ways and means are available to help us beyond the invitation to "come apart and pray awhile"? "Fasting" is an ancient custom on this holy island designed to help us in

the Lenten fray, a custom often misunderstood and abused.

"Fasting" is a much larger word than we usually think and contains no "Farewell to Alleluia." The word may be used devotionally in at least three senses, and please don't worry about the grammar involved. "Fasting" may mean increasing the pace of our spiritual growth; it can mean getting a firmer grip on our faith; and "fasting" should indicate that we are more permanently dyed by His Holy Spirit.

Since fasting seems to be the key discipline of Lent, let us enlarge on these three meanings of the word as we ready ourselves for "Holy Island."

To fast can mean to speed up the tempo of our spiritual growth through the many stimulants Lent provides—attending extra services of worship, keeping more frequent times apart in His presence, participating in a variety of study opportunities in certain neglected areas of our religious life, selecting from a rich store of serious reading matter designed for the season, and seizing the many chances given for practicing self-denial. In Lent "this work [of spiritual growth] goeth fast on, and prospereth." In the first place, fasting means speeding up, getting a move on.

To fast can mean also to strengthen our staying power and never to give up our plans for increasing our spiritual growth until the goal is attained. Whether it be the conquering of a bad habit or the establishing of a daily time of devotion, it means resisting successfully the temptation to grow weary of well doing and chuck the

whole business. We need to concentrate on getting a firmer grip on our faith, and thinking through to a solid core of belief centered in God's revelation of Himself in Christ, and His continued presence with us, beyond the contradictory muddle people are usually in. The Psalmist made this point when he declared of the Lord, "For he spake, and it was done; he commanded and it [our purpose] stood fast." To fast means, in the second place, to hang on tighter.

To fast can also mean to accept certain needed disciplines so that bodily matters will not interfere with, nor dominate, the affairs of the soul. This involves abstemiousness (abstinence)—temperance in eating, drinking and spending; a tightening up of our laxity in such areas; a giving up of what is non-essential or less essential so that time, money and physical strength may be used for more important things. In brief, to fast in this sense means making more time for God and thus giving His Holy Spirit more of a chance to work in us. "Is it such a fast that [you] have chosen?" So fasting means, in the third place, making the color fade proof.

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Lent lasts forty and six days, and calls on us to fast in order to bring forth more Christ-like life. The acceptance of fasting as part of our visit to Holy Island should pep up and nourish our first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

Remember these things, and cling to this thought as the spirit of the season, that Lent is no "Farewell to Alleluia."

Those who have kept the "fast" under the discipline of obedience to God, will find by Eastertide that ashes will have been exchanged for beauty, and sorrow for joy.

If we make of Lent a holy island we'll find fasting, in the ways already staked out, a demanding but rewarding discipline which will equip us to return from our time apart, ready and eager to enter the fray of life.

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A Prayer as Lent Begins

O God, for another day, we thank Thee; may its hours pass by swiftly, but not so fast as to leave us helpless in the flow of things; let the minutes and hours find us ready for the work to be done; help us make the most of the endless opportunities to serve and to love; may every contact this day bring new happiness and new knowledge; keep us near to Thee through all the day, and, no matter what hours have been spent or remain to be spent, keep Thou near to us. Amen.

Prayers for Any Day

Merciful Father, forgive us for all our neglect, lukewarmness, undisciplined thoughts and actions over the swift-passing days. At this moment of beginning a season of special prayer, study, and bodily discipline, give us the desire to be made clean and strong within and to give ourselves earnestly to the labors and care which will bring our desires and thoughts and feelings into one with Thy will for us. This day we make our covenant with Thee and ask for strength and guidance to mend, to give up, and to grow,

through obedience to Thy Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

O God, we thank Thee for the gift of speech, that we may communicate one with another about Thee, and make known Thy gift of eternal life through Thy Son Jesus Christ. Help us to use our voices divinely; inspire and control our tongues. Gear our speech slow enough for wisdom, but fast enough to catch and hold attention; and give our words power enough to be convincing. So help us to further the coming of Thy Kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Grant to us all this day, dear Lord, enough sense to see what is right and to practise it, to recognize what is wrong and to avoid it, to yearn for and work for the best and happiest relationships with all whom we shall meet, and may "the trumpets that sound in the morning" for us be heard as far as we walk, speak, and reach; and, good Lord, keep us free from all narrowness, pettiness, and self-sensitiveness, so that Thy joy may abound in us and touch others. Amen.

Good Lord, send us such a measure of Thy goodness that all our contacts may leave behind a bit of Thy presence and glory. As the day moves from start to finish, keep us alert and ready to seize upon every chance to speak a good

word in Thy name. Let no obstacle frighten us; and help us to discern and minister to the need and to bring out the good in each person we meet. Amen.

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